Commentary

China revisited: a personal view

Yue-man Yeung

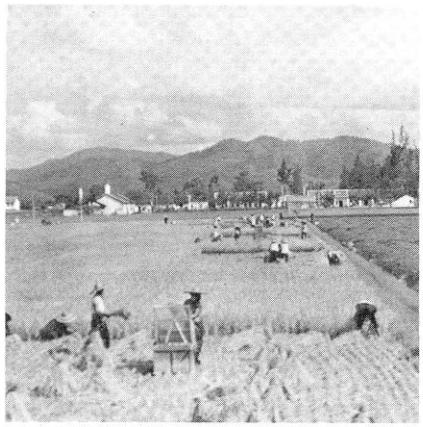

Photo: Yue-man Yeung

Water conservancy projects, integrating irrigation and hydroelectric power generation have brought a measure of prosperity to once devastated lands in Kwangtung Province, China.

Yue-man Yeung, Senior Program Officer with IDRCs *Social Sciences Division based in Singapore, visited Kwangtung Province, People's Republic of China, earlier this year. His visit included four cities — Canton, Chao-ch'ing, Fo-shan and Ts'ung-hua — factories, a hydroelectric plant, a people's commune, homes, and wide stretches of China's countryside. In this article he gives us his impressions of China as it compares to his memories of it prior to the 1949 Revolution.*

The Canton of 1944 I remember from my boyhood days was probably similar to most other coastal Chinese cities under Japanese occupation. The military presence was keenly felt and shortages of goods and services were acute. The streets, often littered with uncollected garbage, teemed with beggars and other destitutes scrounging for food and ways to keep alive. Canton's most impressive landmark then was the bridge over Pearl River, which was later blown up prior to the retreat of the Nationalist Government in 1950.

Today Canton looks highly orderly and organized. Imposing new structures such as the expansive Canton Trade Fair, the railway station, public parks, and new bridges across the Pearl River have been built. Although the common shophouses and residential precincts are much the same as I remembered them, the relatively uniform cityscape is occasionally punctuated by highrise hotels. Downtown Canton abounds with shops, department stores, and people. Bicycles are everywhere, even though Canton is served by an efficient electrical trolley bus system.

Signs of urban encroachment, however, are obvious in the suburbs where built-up areas surround garden plots. The streets and homes are poorly lit, a probable consequence of the priority accorded to the burgeoning industries.

After three decades of continual political education and campaigns, the people appear to be highly politicized: everywhere people spoke to us with enthusiasm about nation building and seemed dedicated to achieving production targets. Two years after his death, Mao's presence is still pervasive — his likeness and quotations are found in every public place, factory, commune, and home. However, Mao's portrait is paired with Chairman Hua's and the slogans often link the ideas of both.

Under their leadership, China has attempted to reduce the differences between physical labour and mental work, the proletariat and farmers, the city and the countryside. At every briefing we were given, the cadres were emphatic about the four goals of modernization that China aspired to reach by the end of this century: to rank with the developed countries in industrialization, agriculture, defense, and science and technology.

These stated goals of modernization are indicative of the Chinese leaders' keen awareness that China lags behind the developed countries in many fields. For all the achievements brought about since the 1949 Revolution, China remains a relatively underdeveloped country. In the cities visited and the countryside passed, evidence was readily available that the old and the new go hand in hand. Rototillers are used in the same paddy field as ox-drawn plows, and imported Toyotas and Datsuns share the same road with human-drawn carts.

It would be unfair to compare China's level of development with the developed countries using the usual yardsticks of measurement. For one thing, China is run according to a social and political system stressing the principle of self-reliance.

From the information I obtained, goods are expensive relative to wages. For example, while a worker earns on average 40 to 60 *yuan* (approximately US$24-$36, 1 *yuan* is equivalent to about US$0.60) a month, they must pay 130-175 *yuan* for a bicycle. The price range of some basic goods and services gives a good illustration of the cost of living: a bar of soap costs 1-1.5 *yuan*, a wrist watch, 270-320 *yuan*, a toothbrush, 0.5 *yuan*. These prices were about the same in different cities.

It is thus not surprising that few household goods, beyond the barest essentials, are found in homes. Despite its relatively high price, however, the bicycle seems to be an item in which many households readily invest. I was told that every working adult owns a bicycle and many households possess several, depending on the number of individuals at work.

On the other hand, the usual items of family expenditures do not cost much in China. Education, for instance, is heavily subsidized by the state. Piped water costs the equivalent of only 15 cents per person per month, and electricity, 1 cent per watt per month, calculated according to the drawing power of the lighting unit, not the cumulative number of watts used. Housing is also subsidized by the state or the employer, and an employee usually

pays no more than 5 *yuan* a month for his living quarters. Our guide, for instance, informed us that for a space of 200 square feet, exclusive of the kitchen and toilet, he paid 2.4 *yuan* in Canton. He estimated that the monthly cost of living for a person would be no more than 15 *yuan*. Women are actively encouraged to participate in the labour force. To relieve them from child-rearing and household responsibilities, nurseries and daycare centres are available in cities and villages.

Housing, especially in the urban area, is carefully controlled. No individual or family is allocated housing unless they have found work in the city. Linking housing to work and the administrative order is an effective instrument in regulating rural-urban migration. This, complemented by a rationing system extending to the key commodities — grains, cotton, edible oil, etc. — has been used to effect a predetermined, planned pattern of population distribution. China is thus spared of the many thorny problems that other developing countries still face in the persistent cityward migration. In fact, China has been able to implement a reverse flow of population by dispersing intellectuals and highschool graduates from the urban to rural areas in a movement called *hsia fang*. Thus, for two to three years, they participate in agricultural production.

If the urban development has not been spectacular, I was much impressed with the reconstruction of the rural areas. There were signs everywhere of effective control and utilization of water resources, high yields through heavy use of improved seeds, and electrification and expansion of the rural industries — the three lines considered crucial in the development of people's communes. I was also impressed by the general orderliness and the industry with which farmers worked in this part of the "ricebowl" south. A wide variety of crops, grains, and fruit trees are grown using traditional and modern techniques. Pesticides are regularly sprayed and, unlike the pre-1949 period, a minimum of boundaries demarcate the fields. Arable land has been consolidated and even cemeteries have been removed to give maximum acreage to farming. It is significant that where cemeteries used to occupy two percent of the total land in China prior to 1949, we only saw two — specifically preserved for Muslims — during our trip, and they were in Canton and its suburb.

Water conservancy, integrating irrigation and the generation of hydroelectricity, has been emphasized in China since 1949. Our guide was quick to point out that many parts of the countryside now covered with crops and fruit trees were once badly affected by gully erosion and deforestation. To gain an idea of a water conservancy scheme, we visited the hydroelectric plant at Liu Hsi River, the first of such plants to be completed in Kwangtung in 1958. Built over a period of two years, the plant can irrigate an area of 500,000 *mou*, or about 82,500 acres. With a capacity of 42,000 kW, the scheme has been able to supply electricity and water to a wide area that previously lacked electricity and was affected by periodic droughts and devastating floods.

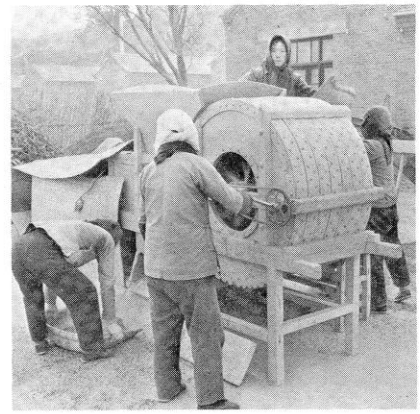

Photo: Clyde Sanger

The group also visited Kuan Ts'un People's Commune in Ts'ung-hua Hsien. With a population of 14,000, the commune is made up of eight production brigades divided into 69 production teams. In a talk to our group, the cadre-in-charge emphasized the mass line approach along which the commune is organized. The production pattern, work distribution, and rewards system are all group organized. But although the tools such as tractors and buffaloes are owned by the commune, housing, furniture, small farming tools, and family savings are individually owned. Each person is credited according to a point system for which he or she is rewarded at the end of a year: apparently, a working adult can earn about 300 *yuan*. The cadre pointed out the very significant improvements that have been made since 1949, when the area was without electricity, medical facilities, irrigation, or communication connections. All these have now been vastly improved and, since 1965, the commune has generated its own electricity. The productivity of the farming sector has increased by leaps and bounds. While it produced 200 *kati* (1 *kati* equals 1.33 lbs) of rice per *mou* in 1949, it produced 1200 *kati* in 1977. The same increases have been realized in many other lines of production. The commune has a total of 32 factories, 10,000 chickens, 10 pumping stations, 4 primary schools, and a hospital. It was claimed that 80 percent of agricultural production is mechanized. One-third of the rice produced is exported to the city and 80 percent of the fruits are also consumed outside the commune. There has been no problem of an exodus of the young people, as labour movement is regulated and controlled.

Villagers contribute 10 cents a month to a medical scheme, and pay another 10 cents for each consultation. The hospital, with 28 beds and facilities in gynecology, dental surgery, X-ray, and general surgery, produces its own medicine by assembling and processing herbs gathered in the area.

While traveling through the countryside, I noticed markets at several locations that were quite well patronized. Interestingly, marketing in rural Kwangtung is periodic. Markets are held on the first and sixth days of every cycle of the month (in China the months all number 30 days and are divided into 3 cycles of 10 days each). In other words, these fairs are held six days a month to allow individuals to dispose of surplus produce from their private plots. I was led to understand that before 1949 the fairs in rural Kwangtung were highly disorganized. One clan might run markets on certain days, while other villages would hold theirs on other days, which resulted in a great loss of productive work. Consequently, the markets have been reorganized to run synchronously six days in a month.

According to frequent visitors in our group, life in China has become more relaxed since the downfall of the "Gang of Four". People are now more willing to speak up, and the general atmosphere, with the emphasis on economic production and clearly set production targets, is one of cautious optimism. Under these improved conditions, cultural life has begun to flourish again. The performance of a Cantonese opera we attended in Canton was superior to what can presently be seen in Hong Kong. It was interesting to note that the artists and musicians were relatively young, and that this art is highly popular with the local people.

From my casual observation of the agricultural development and progress in Kwangtung, I am almost certain that there is much that the developing countries can learn from China's massive experiment in rural reconstruction and development. The evidence suggests that the Chinese are increasingly scientific in their endeavor to upgrade their agricultural production, whether it be food or cash crops, fishery or forestry.

China is as rigid and egalitarian a society as one can expect. People appear to be fully employed both in the countryside and in the cities, inflation is kept in check, the extreme poverty of earlier days has been eliminated. People at every level appear to be united and dedicated to nation building. These are no mean accomplishments for a nation that over the past two centuries has been continually ravished by natural disasters, external aggression, and civil war. In a land where famine used to stalk, people appear to be adequately fed and clothed.

These are the fruits of a monumental experiment that truly revolutionized the most populous country in the world. For many years, China observers were concerned about the transitional problem resulting from the death of Chairman Mao. My observations are that post-Mao China is as dedicated and full of purpose as ever. China after Mao seems well poised for another phase of constructive nation building. □